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The President's Daily Brief

September 22, 1976

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LEBANON: *The change in locale for the inauguration of president-elect Ilyas Sarkis could raise constitutional questions about the legitimacy of his presidency.*

The change was forced by a resumption of heavy fighting in the area of Beirut where Sarkis was to take the oath of office.

The inauguration is now scheduled to take place in Shaturah, a city east of Beirut in Syrian-controlled territory. Leftist leader Kamal Jumblatt has declared that he and his parliamentary supporters will not attend the swearing-in ceremony, which must be witnessed by the assembled Parliament.

Jumblatt's decision to boycott the ceremony and the possibility that other deputies will either choose not to go or will be unable to enter Syrian territory raise the possibility that there will not be a parliamentary quorum for the swearing-in. If Sarkis is not inaugurated in the presence of a quorum, many would claim that he did not have a legal mandate.

The location itself is likely to raise legal questions. Strict constructionists--led by acting prime minister Shamun--contend that the oath-taking must be held not only before a quorum but specifically in Beirut.

If Shamun presses this point, he might attempt to assume power as acting head of state. He decided on Monday to keep the cabinet in continuous session until the inauguration in order "to take care of any eventuality"--a move that may have been intended precisely to facilitate his temporary assumption of power.

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Assuming that Sarkis does take over the presidency on Thursday, the departure of President Franjiyah from office--as much as any special qualities of his successor--may create an opportunity to ease the crisis.

Franjiyah has become a symbol of Christian "tyranny" to the country's Muslim majority and has often provided left-wing leaders justification for their militancy. Indeed, Christian extremism has flourished under his leadership, and the changeover may provide combatants on both sides a face-saving pretext for softening positions they know to be untenable.

The transfer of power to Sarkis, who was elected over four months ago with Syrian support, by no means promises an end to hostilities. It will create new frictions as alliances shift to accommodate the new Christian leader, and it could prompt new violence by extremists who oppose Sarkis' policy of compromise. Resolution of the conflict, moreover, depends to a large extent on broader problems in the Middle East over which Sarkis could have no control.

ISRAEL-SYRIA: *Prime Minister Rabin has cautioned against any assumptions about the longer range significance of the recent arrangement with Syria permitting the reunion of Druze families separated by the disengagement line on the Golan Heights.*

Recent face-to-face meetings between Syrian and Israeli military officers to arrange the family reunions were a departure for the Syrians. Until now, they have kept their direct contacts with the Israelis to a minimum, preferring to communicate through a third party.

Possibly to encourage Damascus, Rabin has said he is ready to consider establishing an open border policy with Syria similar to Israel's "open bridges" policy toward Jordan and its "good fence" policy toward southern Lebanon. Both of these programs provide for a regulated flow of goods and people across Israel's borders.

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Defense Minister Peres has characterized the agreement as a sign of tactical change by Syria toward Israel, but other Israeli officials have warned--as Rabin has--against exaggerating the importance of the new arrangement. They have suggested that President Asad may be responding primarily to pressures from the Druze community in Syria.

Asad needs the support of Syrian Druze leaders for his Lebanon policy. In particular, he wants their assistance in undercutting the support given by Druze in Lebanon to Lebanese leftist leader Kamal Jumblatt, who is himself a Druze.

* * *

CHINA: *Peking has not convened a meeting of the party Central Committee to begin discussions on a post-Mao party leadership.*

The party obviously cannot duck the succession question indefinitely, but a divisive meeting at this time could undermine the carefully constructed facade of unity that the leadership has displayed since Mao's death. It is conceivable that the contending factions are playing for time and that one faction will push for a meeting when it feels sufficiently strong.

A gauge of this strength may emerge from the propaganda line in the next few weeks, especially regarding the future course of the campaign to criticize Teng Hsiao-ping. As Mao entered his final days, more conservative elements in the leadership were able to tone down the campaign and emphasize production themes in its stead. Leftists will probably try to rejuvenate the campaign in order to attack a number of Teng's supporters who are currently members of the Central Committee.

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USSR: *A Soviet fighter currently under development at Ramenskoye test center near Moscow may be a modified version of the MIG-25 interceptor* [redacted]

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[redacted] satellite photography affirm that three more air defense regiments have been equipped with the MIG-25 within the past six months, bringing the total number to ten. [redacted] 25X1

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NOTE

The UK's support for a new and costly NATO airborne radar system may be weakening.

The radar system--known as the Airborne Warning and Control System--is capable of detecting low-flying enemy aircraft and represents a major test of NATO's commitment to make more efficient use of its resources by jointly purchasing a common system.

The UK, largely because of domestic pressures to reduce defense spending, has been in the forefront of those arguing for such a joint approach. It is the only major ally that has earmarked funds to procure the system's most expensive component--a fleet of specially modified Boeing 707s designed to provide a permanent radar umbrella over Western Europe.

While Britain has not renounced or qualified its commitment on AWACS, senior defense officials and the Royal Air Force appear to have shifted their support to the proposed British Nimrod system. Moreover, because of budgetary pressures and a reduction in the value of the earmarked funds due to exchange rate fluctuations, the AWACS allocation--earlier regarded as untouchable--now appears as vulnerable as any other defense budget item.

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